

Question 3

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts one-third of the total essay section score.)

In the following passage Nancy Mairs, who has multiple sclerosis, calls herself a “cripple.” Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Mairs presents herself in this passage. In addition to discussing the significance of Mairs’ choice of the word “cripple” to name herself, you should consider such rhetorical features as tone, word choice, and rhetorical structure.

I am a cripple. I choose this word to name me. I choose from among several possibilities, the most common of which are “handicapped” and “disabled.” I made the choice a number of years ago, without thinking, unaware of my motives for doing so. Even now, I’m not sure what those motives are, but I recognize that they are complex and not entirely flattering. People—crippled or not—wince at the word “cripple,” as they do not at “handicapped” or “disabled.” Perhaps I want them to wince. I want them to see me as a tough customer, one to whom the fates/gods/viruses have not been kind, but who can face the brutal truth of her existence squarely. As a cripple, I swagger.

But, to be fair to myself, a certain amount of honesty underlies my choice. “Cripple” seems to me a clean word, straightforward and precise. It has an honorable history, having made its first appearance in the Lindisfarne Gospel in the tenth century. As a lover of words, I like the accuracy with which it describes my condition: I have lost the full use of my limbs. “Disabled,” by contrast, suggests any incapacity, physical or mental. And I certainly don’t like “handicapped,” which implies that I have deliberately been put at a disadvantage, by whom I can’t imagine (my God is not a Handicapper General), in order to equalize chances in the great race of life. These words seem to me to be moving away from my condition, to be widening the gap between word and reality. Most remote is the recently coined euphemism “differently abled,” which partakes of the same semantic hopefulness that transformed countries from “undeveloped” to “underdeveloped,” then to “less developed,” and finally to “developing” nations. People have continued to starve in those countries during the shift. Some realities do not obey the dictates of language.

Mine is one of them. Whatever you call me, I remain crippled. But I don’t care what you call me, so long as it isn’t “differently abled,” which strikes me as

pure verbal garbage designed, by its ability to describe anyone, to describe no one. I subscribe to George Orwell’s thesis that “the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.” And I refuse to participate in the degeneration of the language to the extent that I deny that I have lost anything in the course of this calamitous disease; I refuse to pretend that the only differences between you and me are the various ordinary ones that distinguish any one person from another. But call me “disabled” or “handicapped” if you like. I have long since grown accustomed to them; and if they are vague, at least they hint at the truth. Moreover, I use them myself. Society is no readier to accept crippledness than to accept death, war, sex, sweat, or wrinkles. I would never refer to another person as a cripple. It is the word I use to name only myself.

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Chief Faculty Consultant Commentary

Question 3 presented students with an excerpt from the essay "On Being a Cripple," part of Nancy Mairs's collection *Plaintext*. The passage begins "I am a cripple" and goes on to discuss Mairs's reason for choosing that term, explaining why she rejects alternatives like "disabled" as inaccurate and euphemistic. Mairs also acknowledges that she uses the word because she wants people to "wince" at it, to see her as a "tough customer." Students were asked to read the passage carefully, then "write an essay in which you analyze how Mairs presents herself in this passage." The question continued, "In addition to discussing the significance of Mairs' choice of the word 'cripple' to name herself, you should consider such rhetorical features as tone, word choice, and rhetorical structure."

Like Question 1, this question called for the analysis of a text. The focus of that analysis differed, however. Question 1 concerned Queen Elizabeth's purpose in her speech at Tilbury—what she wanted her audience to believe, and how she used language for the purpose of swaying them. Question 3 instead asked students to analyze how Mairs "presents" or portrays herself and how her use of "such rhetorical features as tone, word choice, and rhetorical structure" creates and conveys her sense of herself. While the prose analysis of Question 1 focuses on the use of language to persuade, the analysis in Question 3 focuses on the uses of language to constitute a *persona*.

In some ways this kind of textual analysis is more familiar to AP students than that required by Question 1. The fact that Mairs's own writing devoted so much attention to explaining her choice of the term "cripple," however, led many students to overemphasize discussion of this choice in their own essays and to scant discussion of the way the rhetoric of the passage itself conveys Mairs's character. Some of the least satisfactory essays misperceived Mairs, for example by seeing her as complaining; some writers simply paraphrased the passage. In more satisfactory essays, most students were able to read the passage carefully enough to convey in their essays that Mairs's choice of the term "cripple" creates a sense of her as realistic, direct, and honest. Essays at the top of the scoring guide's lower half typically conveyed this understanding but were unable to show convincingly how this honesty was exemplified by the passage's rhetorical features. Essays at the bottom of the scoring guide's upper half were usually able to show how Mairs's choice of "cripple" conveys this sense of self, but found it difficult to discuss other aspects of the passage's language. Only the strongest essays were able to resist the attraction of Mairs's own discussion of her choice of "cripple" over its alternatives and to do what the question really required: to focus their discussion on defining the kind of *persona* Mairs presents to us in this passage and to show how her rhetoric helps portray her as a self-consciously tough-minded swaggerer.

Scoring Guide

General Directions: Scores should reflect the quality of the essay as a whole. Reward the writers for what they do well. Remember that students had 40 minutes to read and write; the resulting essays should thus be thought of as comparable to essays produced in final exams, not judged by standards appropriate for out-of-class writing assignments. All essays, even those scored 8 and 9, are likely to exhibit occasional flaws in analysis or in prose style and mechanics; such lapses should enter into your holistic judgment of the essay's quality. Essays with many distracting errors in grammar and mechanics may not be scored higher than 2.

- 9 Meets all the criteria for an 8 paper and, in addition, is particularly full or apt in analysis or demonstrates particular stylistic command.
- 8 Analyzes aptly and specifically how Nancy Mairs presents herself in this passage. Analysis recognizes Mairs's self-conscious bravado in calling herself a cripple and shows how selected rhetorical features help to convey the complexity of her stance. Prose demonstrates the writer's ability to control a wide range of the elements of effective writing, but need not be without flaws.
- 7 Fits the description of a 6 essay but is distinguished by fuller analysis or stronger prose style.
- 6 Analyzes adequately how Nancy Mairs presents herself in this passage. Often recognizes Mairs's "courageous" or "honest" attitude but not its self-conscious "swagger"; discussion of rhetorical features is usually correct but may not present any insight beyond literal comprehension. A few lapses in diction or syntax may be present, but prose usually conveys the writer's ideas clearly.
- 5 Analyzes adequately how Nancy Mairs presents herself in this passage, but its discussion of rhetorical features may be particularly limited and/or inconsistently pertinent. A few lapses in diction or syntax may be present, but usually prose conveys the writer's ideas clearly.
- 4 Responds inadequately to the question's tasks. May misidentify Mairs's stance, discuss various rhetorical features in the passage without relating them to Mairs's self-presentation, recapitulate Mairs's consideration of alternatives to "cripple" with little attention to rhetorical features, or catalog rhetorical features with limited purpose or accuracy. Prose of 4 essays usually conveys the writer's ideas adequately, but may suggest inconsistent control over such elements of writing as organization, diction, and syntax.

- 3 Meets the criteria for the score of 4 but is particularly unperceptive in its attempts to discuss Mairs's self-presentation or particularly inconsistent in its control of the elements of writing.
 - 2 Demonstrates little or no success in analyzing how Nancy Mairs presents herself in this passage. May substitute a simpler task, such as paraphrasing the passage, embroidering on Mairs's consideration of alternatives to "cripple," discussing euphemism in general, discussing some rhetorical features in general, or praising the courage of those who overcome handicaps. Prose may reveal consistent weaknesses in grammar or another of the basic elements of composition.
 - 1 Meets the criteria for the score of 2 but is particularly simplistic in its responses to the passage or particularly weak in its control of grammar or another of the basic elements of composition.
 - 0 This score is for off-topic responses.
- Indicates blank response.

Sample Essays

EXCELLENT

Ms. Mairs presents herself as strong, intelligent, and funny. She is also frank and even blunt, and she seems to challenge the reader, as well as challenging currently accepted beliefs and ideas. In calling herself "a cripple", she shows her desire to face facts and her firm grip on reality. What she does not say is as obvious as what she does: she is clearly a very courageous woman who has persevered over a difficult situation.

Mairs' frankness is obvious from the first line: "I am a cripple." Later she says, "I refuse to participate in the degeneration of the language to the extent that I deny that I have lost anything in the course of this calamitous disease." Additionally, she indicates a kind of contempt for those who pretend nothing is wrong with or different about anyone. The bluntness which characterizes the passage is evident in word choice, too, in that many words are sharp and hard-sounding, regardless of their meanings: "tough...brutal truth...straightforward...shift...dictates."

The ironic tone used by Mairs is blatant in lines such as, "As a cripple, I swagger." Obviously, since she cannot walk, she cannot swagger. Her metaphorical swaggering is, therefore, the brave front she puts forward. In her choice of the word 'swagger' it is

possible that Mairs gave away more than she intended and confessed to a vulnerability behind her bold comments. Whether or not it is intentional, Mairs has presented herself as multidimensional; although she seems extremely open, she is probably not telling the reader everything.

Mairs' intelligence is demonstrated in her use of impressive vocabulary and complex sentence structures: "Most remote is the recently coined euphemism 'differently abled,' which partakes of the same semantic hopefulness..." Such a sentence could not have been written by a person who is not smart, and Mairs even admits to being a "lover of words."

Mairs shows a flair for sarcastic humor when she notes that "my God is not a Handicapper General." She is subtle but sharp, and she makes her points slyly. In the conclusion, she says that "society is no readier to accept crippledness than to accept death, war, sex, sweat, or wrinkles." An element of humor can be found in this comment in that although humans can in certain circumstances avoid some of these, no one can avoid "sweat" or "death." Mairs pokes at the consciousness of Americans who have closed minds to what is real and true, as her disease is.

That Mairs uses the word cripple to describe herself is not surprising. After reading the passage, the reader is familiar with Mairs' refusal to hide from the truth. However, one wonders whether Mairs truly doesn't "care what you call me, so long as it isn't 'differently abled'." When she says that she "would never refer to another person as a cripple. It is the word I use to name only myself," Mairs admits that the word 'cripple' is an insult in most arenas. Another question is raised with this realization: does Mairs feel so negatively about herself that she willingly identifies herself by a name which is quite unflattering? Mairs is frank about most sides of her illness, but perhaps even she has not dealt with some elements of it.

Comment: This essay, scored 9, is distinguished by its unwavering focus on Mairs's self-presentation and by the perceptiveness with which it reads the passage. The third sentence of the first paragraph states concisely the significance of Mairs's choice of the word "cripple" to name herself; the paragraph accurately characterizes Mairs as "frank and even blunt," "challenging," "strong, intelligent, and funny." The following paragraphs demonstrate cogently how Mairs's stylistic choices convey the traits that define and unify the paragraphs: frankness, irony, intelligence, sarcastic humor. Two paragraphs show particular insight: the treatment of the irony implicit in Mairs's choice of the metaphor of swaggering (paragraph three), and the suggestion that Mairs's implicit recognition that "cripple" is a term not usually valued may admit a vulnerability that most of the passage denies (paragraph six).

As a whole, this essay conveys a subtle understanding of Mairs's stance. It also couches that understanding in specific, economical prose. In contrast to many other responses to Question 3, this essay also demonstrates skill by choosing apt, brief quotations to illustrate or spark analysis. Many less accomplished and less focused essays tended to quote at length

and analyze relatively little, apparently believing the passage would speak for itself. While in fact this passage is more direct than many on previous AP Exams—after all, it does explicitly state Mairs's stance at the end of paragraph one—it nonetheless remains the student's responsibility to explain how the rhetoric of the passage works. This essay does so particularly well.

AVERAGE

In this passage Mairs presents herself as a "cripple." She uses this word to symbolize her independence and strength, and through features such as word choice, tone, and structure, Mairs persuades the reader that her choice of the word "cripple" is the correct one for her.

In this passage, Mairs appears to be a person who knows who she is, what she can do, and what others think she is capable of accomplishing. With the succinct tone of the passage, Mairs implies that she is no-nonsense about her illness and will only reveal her true reasons for calling herself a cripple. She states that words such as handicapped, and disabled have other meanings that she does not wish to be associated with. In lines 11-13 she states clearly what she is. "One to whom the fates/gods/viruses have not been kind, but who can face the brutal truth of her existence squarely." Also by utilizing choice words and phrases such as "wince", "incapacity", "disadvantage", she describes the situations of the handicapped and differently abled while she herself explicitly states that she knows the full meanings and consequences of what she says. Mairs states that by using other words than cripple she would be "...widening the gap between word and reality." However, Mairs' tone also seems to have a condescending manner to it. "Most remote is the ...euphemism "differently abled", which partakes of the same semantic hopefulness..." Through words such as "semantic" and "verbal garbage" (line 39) Mairs seems to disdain those who do not perceive things the same way she does.

One can see that through the conciseness of the passage, the choice words and structure, Mairs presents herself to be a strong, independent woman who does not feel as much sorrow for herself as for those who call themselves, handicapped or differently abled.

Comment: Scored 6, this essay is typical of those at the bottom of the upper half of the scoring guide. It does convey an awareness that Mairs intends the passage to present her as "a strong, independent woman," one who "knows who she is [and] what she can do," and who can also be viewed as "condescending" to those less tough-minded than she. The quotations the writer chooses do illustrate these traits. Particularly in comparison to the preceding essay, however, this response is not well focused on Mairs's self-presentation. Like many of the acceptable but less accomplished essays, it makes its observations about Mairs's character almost as asides in a rehearsal of Mairs's rationale for the choice of

